

Edinburgh libraries not just so welcoming

Haian Dukhan, is a PhD student at the University of St Andrews who moved to Edinburgh last January. He is from Syria and used to live in Palmyra, but came to Scotland to pursue his academic career researching Syria's tribal networks and the state.



While it is true to say that politicians from the First Minister to the Council Leader in Edinburgh have put out the welcome mat to Syrian refugees, earlier this week Haian was not feeling just so welcome. He takes up the story:

"I am still working on my PhD whilst being in Edinburgh and commute to St Andrews once a week to meet my supervisors. I am a wheelchair user.

"I have been using Edinburgh University Library without any accessibility issues since I moved here. The season of the exams started at the university since mid-April and will continue until mid-May and so the university library has been really packed and it has been really difficult for me to find a place to do my work in.

"I decided to use other libraries by using their resources and space to continue working on my dissertation. Here is the problem which I guess is shocking for Edinburgh, the capital of Scotland, to be having.

"I registered with the Scottish National Library and I thought I could work there. I made my way to lift and went to the second floor where the reading rooms are.

"One of the staff followed me saying that I cannot use the

second floor reading room because they do not have another lift and that for health and safety reasons, I am not allowed there until they have another lift. I was put in a room downstairs with one of their staff.

"I felt suffocated there and told them that I choose to work in the library because I want to be around people and not be restricted to a room like this. Their answer was that this is what they could give me for now until they have another lift.

"I went to Edinburgh Central Library which is just opposite to the Scottish National Library. I registered there and was given a card. I made my way to the lift that should take me to the reading room. The lift was very small to an extent that I was hardly able to fit my wheelchair in it. I had to move my wheelchair in a strange way to be able to fit it there. I struggled for a few days trying to work there and things were OK but not fine. I went to the Central Library to be told that the lift is broken down.

"I am writing this letter to explain that in my view the level of wheelchair access at Edinburgh most important libraries is zero and it is shocking to face this situation when the government is trying to get people with disability motivated to work. How can they get to work when some of the most important facilities are not accessible them? I hope you can endeavour to look into this problem as soon as possible so that people with disability can use the libraries as other able-bodied people can.

✘ The Edinburgh Reporter spoke to the National Library of Scotland where the situation seems to be under review at least. A spokesman told us:

"We are committed to providing equality of access to those with mobility impairment.

"We are currently introducing new equipment and training for

staff to enable safe evacuation in the event of a fire for those with mobility impairment.

“This will be part of our rolling programme of improvements enabling access to our Main Reading Room by June 2016, to our Special Collections Reading Room by December 2016 and supplemented by improvements to reading room doors over 2016/17 to assist in entry/exit for those in wheelchairs.”

✘ The Central Library is owned and run by the city council.

A Council spokesperson said: “We aim to make the city’s libraries as accessible as possible for all users. Unfortunately the lift in the Central Library was out of order briefly yesterday afternoon due to a fault. This has been resolved and we apologise for the inconvenience caused.”

The Edinburgh Reporter has asked to be kept informed of the improvement plans at the National Library of Scotland and we hope to report back to you about these later this year. It may not be quick enough to allow Haian access while he studies for his doctorate, but at least others will be able to get access in future.